

Léopold Survage (1879–1968)

My Speech on Modigliani in Paris in 1947

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It is thanks to the friendship and affection I feel for Modigliani that I have undertaken to outline some of the characteristics of this unique painter in so far as I have understood them during the periods of his life in which I myself have played a part.

The legend that has grown up around Modigliani has, like all legends, already attributed to him things which are not always true or which are interlaced with facts that have been misinterpreted. Others were true, like those that gave rise to such epithets as 'Bohemian' and 'Montparno', as opposed to that class of Parisians considered to be 'the honest bourgeoisie' with their mundane and dreary way of life, imposed by their work, their character and their concern for upholding a good reputation in their neighbourhood.

The young man was poor. The only baggage he brought with him when he arrived from Italy was the spiritual heritage of his Israeli family with purity and idealism only that race is capable of developing. He had inherited his nobility of soul from his mother. He showed me her photograph with poignant love and admiration. A striking face, intelligent and fine, with an aristocratic look that ran in the family.

His most remarkable quality, one that never left him even in the most difficult and frustrating situations in his life was his nobility of soul. His entire appearance, his gestures, his words were those of a long line of aristocrats without pride and full of simplicity and amiability.

The abrupt leap, his departure from Livorno and his abandonment of the family that had protected him from the harshness of life, was the first major shock he had encountered.

Would this young man adjust to the remorseless demands of Paris? He brought with him his gifts, his impetuosity. How would the city welcome him?

At that time Paris attracted many young artists from many countries, drawn by the city's artistic reputation.

These ardent and untamed spirits had left their families in pursuit of an ideal, in order to practise an art that was one of the most deceptive in that it was the most indeterminate and also the richest.

In their respective countries and families, they had not known poverty. They had left their quiet lives, lives without care and without anguish as to what tomorrow would bring. In Paris they were confronted by a violent contrast between riches and poverty, opulence and misery. They found themselves automatically at the bottom of a melting pot, among the poorest of people, with no contact with the population. They were among the lowliest categories, where manners and customs had been formed by misery.

Here they were despised foreigners, without a cent to their name, but with the highest of aspirations, unbounded temperament, a great deal of intelligence and occasionally genius.

They had formed two groups, one in Montmartre, the other in Montparnasse. Modigliani belonged to the latter.

It was as if Paris had been invaded by commandos. Occasionally many other artistic commandos had arrived in Paris earlier. Among them had been the Impressionist group, which had already fallen into routine and mediocrity. Everyone is familiar with the struggle that a Gauguin, a Cézanne, a Pissarro and a Van Gogh had had to face.

Once they had arrived, history repeated itself on ground that had already been cleared but was no less demanding, since the contribution of these young painters was still more difficult to accept because their aims were more diverse, richer and more personal – and even contradictory in appearance, albeit justified. They had all had a classical education in their own countries.

Modigliani had painted in Italy – but in Paris it was sculpture that first attracted him. In Montparnasse he met Brancusi. The difference in their character and their nature was obvious from the start. This can be seen as an example of the different movements that inspired this generation.

Modigliani had sculpted 10 or 12 heads which he showed in 1911, I believe, at the Salon d'Automne. These heads had all become elongated and ended up becoming columns. Brancusi tended to favour round forms and the head he had sculpted ended up representing an egg resting on a horizontal plane.

At that time Modigliani lived on the Boulevard Raspail in a small shed-like building at the bottom of a garden. When I went to see him there, demolition work had already begun on the house and one wall was missing from the building in which he lived. He had hung up a length of material as a curtain. His studio – since it was here that he worked, also sleeping on the floor – was filled with stone blocks, and with the famous heads, each of which had such a beautiful form and a structure and shape that served as the starting point for his painting.

Amid this poverty he was full of enthusiasm and activity. He did not yet feel the need to turn to alcohol since he lived on the reserves of strength and energy he had brought with him from his home in Italy. Later a shortage of money would lead to a constant state of malnourishment and a strong temptation to replace food with a glass of wine or a café *marc* costing two sous, to make himself feel on form and ready to work.

This was also the example set by the Parisian worker he would bump into in the bistros, who was in the same boat, underpaid and undernourished and seeking solace in drink. This was how Modigliani picked up the appalling habit which he could not give up.

But such was the force of his spiritual passion that his art did not suffer from this diet; quite the contrary, the exhilaration of the individual revealed itself in the expression of what he created with an unprecedented intensity. He soon began to paint and, as a born psychologist with perspicacity and finesse, found his true calling. He interpreted the character of those who approached him rapidly and with honesty. His gift for psychology was so intense that it could be said that it was his models who resembled his portraits and not the opposite, since he emphasised and exaggerated their principle characteristics, bringing out those that in the model were hidden beneath the superimposing of secondary features.

These portraits surpassed the astuteness of caricature. He would sometimes say: 'I have found some means to allow me to express myself'.

It was, in fact, these means that allowed him to achieve a grand style. He also said: 'What I have before my eyes is an explosion that I try to master and organise'. And the tools that enabled him to reach these ends were geometry, proportion and rhythm.

He worked rapidly, since his work was preceded by profound reflection. His psychological instinct first led him to carry out a study into the character of his model in the form of a conversation – something which took more or less time – but once his decision was made, the portrait conceived, he worked impetuously.

To take one example. Before painting the portrait of my wife, he asked her to sit at the piano. She played Ravel's '*Ma mère l'Oye*' (Mother Goose) for him, a piece he was very fond of; he watched her long and intensely and without warning decided to start working. With a sudden gesture and using a fine brush he traced the outline of the drawing, which can still be seen.

His greatest concern was to find models, something which was very difficult since the people he asked to sit for him were unwilling to do so – the women on the pretext that they were not beautiful enough and the men because they hadn't the time. But once a rendezvous had been agreed upon he was there, on the spot, around nine o'clock in the morning, full of apprehension and frequently rushing out into the street to see if they were on their way. If the model didn't arrive his disappointment was great. He was constantly worried that he would lack a model and frequently complained about this problem. He would even accost people in the street or in cafés and ask them to model for him, but without much success.

One day he told me that an art lover who had commissioned his portrait and agreed to pay him part of the money in advance had pestered him to start working on it. 'Your portrait is ready, all that is needed is to release it', he said, tapping his forehead with his finger.

He would begin by tracing his drawing with a very fine brush, in much the same way as he drew his famous pencil sketches, sometimes controlled or sensitive, sometimes violent and harsh, depending on the character of the sitting model and the way he felt about him or her. This proven and well-reflected side was complemented by considerable improvisation. On a tracery of primary lines, conceived and ended from the outset in a severe,

geometric style would flow an outpouring of details, characterised simultaneously by an impressive elegance and force. The outline establishing the category and class of the figure became clouded in a flood of details indicative of his intimate character. He so loved to probe what was unfathomable in the human being, something he did not tire of before he had created 17 or 19 portraits of the same person, one after the other.

This work demanded a remarkable nervous tension, an uninterrupted flow of momentary transpositions of the reality of the model present on a psychological plan expressed using the means for which he was famous – the geometrisation of forms, through which he pushed them to the extreme limits of expression.

I have sometimes seen him stop like a runner out of breath. It was then that he felt the need for a crack of the whip and the remedy was there within his grasp, a glass of red wine or a shot of *marc*, after which he would immediately get back to work. After a few hours working in this way he would feel unable to continue and in most cases the portrait was complete.

He never cleaned his palette, which grew thicker and thicker, heavier and heavier. Often, once the work was finished, he would sing – Hebrew songs and mantras, full of sadness and nostalgia. In the evening he would go out with a friend and, walking very slowly, discuss music, painting or literature. He did not, in fact, like walking and would often stop to elaborate on his discussion, well-chosen and well-composed, just like his painting.

During 1917–18 he spent time in Nice while I was there and began working at my place, since the hotels would only let him stay for a few days because he made so much noise when he came home at night and disturbed the other guests.

He was superstitious, and like a true Italian, paid a great deal of importance to coincidences and omens. His Italianness also came to the fore in his frequent quotations from Dante and these qualities were not without impact on his painting.

What interested him most was the human being. It was through him and around him that invisible forces showed themselves. Behind the physical apparition he imagined an entire world of mystery. In the street one evening we bumped into a drunk who could hardly walk, weaving about and struggling to stay upright: 'You see,' Modigliani said, 'he is being drawn by evil spirits, he is resisting them and struggling against them.'

One day he showed me his hand, rather large and plump but nicely shaped, saying that he had been born under the sign of Scorpio and that he was destroying himself.

This tendency towards introspection and preponderance, together with the interest he displayed in the human being, explains why the only subjects to be found in his work are portraits.

At my suggestion he painted two landscapes but half-heartedly, saying finally: 'In landscape there is nothing to express.'

His time among us was brief but the mark he left is deep and ineffaceable. He accepted his legendary poverty without a fight and with no sadness because for him earthly goods, which he considered chains, held no importance.